



VG Interview: Cherrie Moraga

Maria-Antónia Oliver-Rotger (M-A O-R): What have been your major dramatic influences?

Cherrie Moraga (CM): My major influence has been the bilingualism and working-class theater of the Chicano Teatro movements, especially El Teatro Campesino. Also the poetic sensuality of Federico García Lorca. The teachings of María Irene Fornes allowed me to enter playwriting as a poet, to find the story through image and character, i.e. an organic place of the heart, rather than through the progressive plot-line (action-driven) structure. I have been inspired by the technique of other playwrights: the language and structural inventiveness of African-American Suzan Lori Parks, the courage of the female characterization of the Puerto Rican playwright Migdalia Cruz. The storytelling en voz alta de mis tías y mi mamá around the kitchen table introduced me (especially my mother) to the dramatic art of story-telling.

**M-A O-R: What caused you to start writing drama after having written poetry and prose?**

CM: After publishing *Loving in the War Years* (1983) which was very autobiographical, my own story had finally been told on the page. This allowed space within me for character (some one other than myself to enter) my unconscious. The character started speaking out loud. This was Corky from *Giving Up the Ghost*. It was oral. Thus, the beginnings of dramatic writing.

Interview by:
Maria-Antónia
Oliver-Rotger
Date: January
2000



VG Interview: Cherrie Moraga

M-A O-R: What do you think is the main difference between theatre and essay as means of creative and political expression?

CM: Both my essays and plays attempt to explore a political question or contradiction through the mind or the heart. By that I mean, both genres require analysis and a heart-felt honesty. But the essay is fundamentally one-voiced perspective, my own. Theater allows for contradiction to reside among the characters. They show themselves and in the showing the political issues regarding the oppressive aspects of the dominant culture or of our culture are exposed through the “living bodies” of the actors. The audience receives many perspectives through divergent characters. And although the playwright may try to direct the audience to her own perspective, she cannot thoroughly enforce their perception of it. Also, as August Wilson has said, plays are fundamentally generated by metaphor and story. My plays always start with an image that reflects the heart of the story to be told.

M-A O-R: I find that your plays stress the social differences in “real” public space. Ritual space and time is also very important in your drama. You draw attention to the “real” social space that conditions and shapes the lives of your characters, but also to the “imagined” or “imaginary” space that is necessary for spiritual, cultural and political regeneration. Why is this juxtaposition of spaces so important to you?

CM: This juxtaposition is precisely what makes it theater for me. Theater is three-dimensional living art form requiring real live bodies. It originated from ritual. It is that marvelous place where the physical and metaphysical and the relationship between the two can be made manifest and interpreted by the playwright in collaboration with actor, director, designer, etc.

M-A O-R: What are your potential target audiences? Do you think your theatre “travels” well to all audiences? What things in particular do you think that particular audiences might like or dislike?

CM: I have attached the essay “Sour Grapes” to respond to the questions above.



VG Interview: Cherrie Moraga

From “Sour Grapes”:

[T]he aesthetics of Euro-American theater—what is considered “good”—remains institutionally unaltered and secured by the standard theater-goer who pays “good money” to see it; that is, a theater which reflects the world as that middle-American understands it, one which at its core, equates free enterprise with freedom. As Chicano theater historian, Jorge Huerta, puts it: “If theater is a temple, it is now dedicated to corporate greed. “A few “darkies,” a few “commies” and “perverts” may slip through the cracks, but the gestures are token attempts to keep the marginalized in this country, that growing discontent “minority”—pacified. Exceptions to the rule never become the rule. Sometimes I marvel at my own naiveté. Throughout my twelve years of writing for the American theater, over and over again I am referred to the Aristotelian model of the “well-made play.” So, good student that I am, I track down Aristotle’s Poetics. I read it, re-read it, take copious notes. But not until I read the Marxism of Brecht, then Boal’s “Theater of the Oppressed,” does my discomfort with the Aristotelian system begin to make any sense. Aristotle created his poetics within the context of a slave-based economy, an imperialist democracy, not unlike the corporate-controlled democracy we are witnessing in the United States today. Women and slaves were not free citizens in Aristotle’s Greece. And today, the very people (Mexican and American at once) who take centerstage in my plays daily have their citizenship denied, questioned, and/or unauthenticated. These are me, my mother, my cousins, my ancestors and my children. These are my characters, like Wilson’s, the children of slaves. And when the children of slaves, become playwrights, even our literary ancestors are proffered freedom. (...) Corporate Amerika is not ready for a people of color theater that holds members of its audiences complicit in the oppression of its characters. Who would buy a ticket to see that? Audiences grow angry (although critics as their spokespeople may call it “criticism”) when a work is not written for them, when they are not enlisted as a partner in the protagonists’ struggle, when they may be asked to engage through self-examination rather than identification, when they must question their own centrality. (...)

When the reviews for “Watsonville” came out, the only official judges on the play’s significance represented the only class of people not presented on stage, the middle-class Euro-American who regarded the play as outsiders. The play’s structure didn’t adhere to the requirements of a “well-made play,” they complained. “Who is the main character?” “Too many stories.” “Epic in dimension,” but “the playwright just doesn’t pull it off.” Okay, who needs them—these reviewer guys and (sometimes) gals? Progressive theater needs them because they bring in the middle-class ticket-buyers, those who can afford to pay full-price on a Saturday night and cover the cost of all the group rates and freebies that bring in the audiences who do see their lives reflected in the work.



VG Interview: Cherrie Moraga

Without governmental support for the arts, community-based theaters striving to create an art of integrity and beauty, are forced into dependent relationships with whiteuppermiddleclassamerica. Still, this is not just a question of exploiting the monied classes for the advancement of the disenfranchised, there is also a moral and aesthetic obligation here. If critics refuse to learn the traditions, the languages, the sensibilities of the artists they critique how are they then to educate their own readers? As August Wilson states, "The true critic does not sit in judgement. Rather he seeks to inform his reader, instead of adopting a posture of self-conscious importance in which he sees himself a judge and final arbiter of a work's importance or value." Simply put, how can a critic judge a work he knows nothing about? And how can s/he call something representative of American theater when his definition of "American" remains a colonial one, i.e. White America perceiving Blackness through the distorted mirror of its own historical slave-owner-segregationist racist paranoia and guilt, while all other people of color remain racially invisible. (...)

Few theater professionals really comprehend the obstacles to creating a colored (and I would add female) theater in White America, except those who have suffered at its hands. I do not turn to this writing to discuss the merits or weaknesses of my personal work. (For I know the body of my writings contain both). I turn to these words to discuss the politics of trying to write and produce theater in a country where the people you speak of, with, and for are a theatrical non-event or worse in "real life" are the object of derision and scape-goating.

M-A O-R: This is more a comment than a question about *Heroes and Saints*, but I would appreciate it if you added any observation or comment you find pertinent. You have said that Valdez's *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* was a source of inspiration to you. I think that the fact that your main character, Cerezita, is a female, deformed intellectual and that you focus on both social, gender, and sexual issues, turns her into a metonymic representation of various struggles, as well as a heroic figure standing up for a necessary social collective regeneration that encompasses all these issues.

CM: Okay. I think Valdez created some very original images as a director. I never would've thought of that head without him. His revolutionary was a man (yet, the head had no genitalia to prove it); therefore, my "generic" head and revolutionary would be a woman, and by virtue of her womanhood, prove to be a more revolutionary revolutionary, encompassing struggle against all the oppressive forces you have mentioned.



VG Interview: Cherrie Moraga

M-A O-R: *Watsonville* expresses a concern about the fate of illegal immigrants and it was written and performed at a time in which, if I am not wrong, proposition 187 was being a source of controversy in California. I know that you went to Watsonville with Ana Castillo at some point before or during the strike. What did you do in Watsonville? Could you comment on the impact that experience had on you?

CM: The trip to Watsonville I took with Ana Castillo was to work with a group of emerging women writers-activists-residents there. It was a one day visit. It was an early meeting with a community whose history of struggle I was aware of for many years. In the actual writing of *Watsonville* I returned and did extensive interviews with Guadalupanas, Huelguistas, and community organizers there. They gave me the language for the play. They provided proof for what I already knew as a Chicana growing up in a household of altares and deep spiritual conviction: that revolutionary struggle must be generated and re-generated by spiritual faith. I don't mean the institution of the Church, but pura fe.

M-A O-R: There are moments in *Watsonville* where you highlight the tensions between men and women, and even between women themselves. Some of your female characters are involved in the fight for labor rights, although they do not relinquish their duties as mothers and wives. You portray characters like Dolores Valle and Lucha as extremely resolute and strong characters. What comes first, the freedom of women or the freedom of Chicano/Mexican workers? How do you suggest Chicanas and women in general should deal with men like Don Arturo and Chente?

CM: We deal with our families which include men like Don Arturo and Chente, our fathers, brothers, spouses, etc. The struggle for women's freedom requires constant vigilance and very conscious and conscientious strategizing. We must always be aware of who has the power in what situation and why? At times our rights as workers (where there is equity between men and women workers, but severe worker exploitation) come first. At times when sexism is preventing effective solidarity among workers, that must be addressed first. It's about sound political strategizing, naming the many and changing faces of the enemy and responding to any obstacle toward real social justice when it shows itself.



VG Interview: Cherrie Moraga

M-A O-R: In both *Watsonville* and *Heroes and Saints* women are crucial for furthering social change. You also give credit to religious community activism through the figure of Juan, especially in *Watsonville*. There is no doubt also a strong criticism of Catholic ideology in your plays. Could you comment on how religion can play a crucial role in furthering social rights and commitment within the Mexican-American community? What aspects of religion—Catholicism in this case—have to change in order for it to adjust to the social needs of individuals?

CM: I use the model of “Liberation Theology” in the figure of Juan because it’s one form of Catholicism in concert with Latinos and Latin Americans which counters a culture of passivity. I think my critique is obvious. All aspects of religion and religious law that endanger women’s lives, limit the full expression of our humanity (men and women) in terms of our sexuality, and that requires us to accept injustice in hopes of a just afterlife is not a spiritual practice, but a materialist oppressive practice that serves (in the case of the Catholic Church) Capitalist Patriarchy.

M-A O-R: What are your views on the treatment of illegal immigrants in the United States? How do you see the current relationship between the U.S. and Mexico? How do you think this relationship may evolve in the near future?

CM: See “Sour Grapes” where I discuss a bit of this.

From “Sour Grapes”:

(...) I’m angry and I write about it. I write when little in the national picture reflects back anything I understand as common sense. What was initiated by the California’s Proposition 187 in the mid-90s and nationalized in Congress, is the lie in the line, the borderline. When I first began this essay in the Fall of 1996, Congress had already made recommendations that would require a national ID, repeal the 14th Amendment’s guarantee of citizenship to everyone born in the U.S. , limit due process for asylum seekers, deny undocumented children a public education, and increase—yet once again—border patrol enforcement. Ironically, this turn-of-the-century “witch hunt” against “illegal immigrants” is being mounted primarily against Mexicans and Central Americans, people with roots in this continent that surpass the Anglo-American by millennia. The real truth is Americans are being kept out of América. As the century comes to a close, California emerges as the brain-child of a legislation of fear and scapegoatism. 187 laid fertile ground for the unrestrained xenophobia and racism of Propositions 209 and 227, which followed a few years later.



VG Interview: Cherrie Moraga

The combination of the abolition of affirmative action and bilingual education in our public schools ensures that the Latino/a student, in particular, (the largest minority in California), will remain firmly situated in the underclass of this country. We will remain “illegal” and “illiterate,” which is exactly where Corporate Amerika prefers its working poor. In the meantime, U.S. corporations (thanks to NAFTA) can (without restraint) cross the border in order to exploit Mexican labor and land (the maquiladoras, a case in point) but Mexicans cannot return the favor by freely seeking employment in the U.S. Generated by the same cultural arrogance and greed of U.S. corporations and their legislators, the so-called progressive American Art World, inflicts admittedly more benign but equally insidious acts of exclusion on Chicano and other U.S. Latino artists. It is precisely the indigenismo of Latino culture, that renders it “foreign” and of little interest to U.S. culture at large, a culture of European immigrants. Ironically it is the same indigenism that makes much of U.S. Latino culture fundamentally “American” in the original native sense of the term, not the constitutionally-constructed one. While regional theaters complain as federal legislators hack away at their government funding, those very institutions subscribe to the same narrow definition of American culture, that their so-called enemies on Capitol Hill do. They want us to forget our origins and in the act of forgetting, make our work palatable to an American consumer culture. But I/we are not so easily eaten.

I am a third-generation Mexican born in the U.S. My mama was born in Santa Paula, California in 1914; my maternal grandmother was born in the Sonoran desert in 1888. Was it Arizona then? Was it México? In the 19th century, borders were drawn like fingered lines in the sand, and erased with every wagon wheel. In the 1840s, U.S. land had been Mexican land; a generation before that, it was Spanish territory; and before that and always Apache, Yaqui, Seri, Papago. Same land. Same folk. But shifting geopolitical borders, slavery, rape, intermarriage and Catholicism name the land and its dwellers differently and our identities change along with the changes. But never never thoroughly. This is the American landscape, (...) upon which the United States imposes itself. This “nation” born in 1776, this “frontier” appropriated in 1848, this “New Spain” stolen in 1519. How little historical time is that as compared to the ancient cultures of the world? To counter the genocidal racism laid bare by recent national anti-immigrant measures, progressives assert, “but it was immigrants who built this country.” In order to justify the integration of new immigrants into U.S. society, liberals portray the United States as a nation constructed exclusively by immigrant-labor; while slavery, the contributions of Native peoples, and the theft of Native lands are conveniently ignored. So this is the tough part. Jews identify as an historically-immigrant culture . . . but lay claim to a piece of land turned property . . . where another people presided before them. Is it Zion or Palestine?



VG Interview: Cherrie Moraga

The Spanish did the same thing to the Jews (along with the Moors) more than half a millennium earlier. Immigrant whites follow suit five hundred years (and five days) ago in América. . . call it manifest destiny, call it the gold rush, call it the godly-thing to do. . . call it convert los indios. . . call it sugar-cane, banana plantations, call it Phoenix, Arizona and Club Med, yuppie gentrification in La Misión de San Panchito, call it New Age Spiritualism, call it whatever you want, indigenous Americans continue to suffer as a consequence of European- immigrant cultural and political domination. (Witness the neo-colonialization and cultural appropriation by East Coast immigrant artists of the U.S. Southwest -- "the New New Mexico.") How quickly we (native-born and immigrant) are required to forget our place of origin as guarantee to our Americanism. But what does a culture of forgetfulness produce except suburban shopping malls and more and more violent video games? True, every immigrant people must reckon with the monolith of this nation-state of the United States of America. The border will not disappear overnight. But they do not have to believe its lies. They do not have to believe that a "nationality," a "culture" was invented with the signing of the declaration of independence. If the Bill of Rights could be altered to give rights to a U.S. -conceived fetus and deny rights to a U.S. -born child of an undocumented immigrant, how much confidence should we put into the constitution as a reflection of the cultural/ethical values of the peoples of the United States of America.

On my more lucid days (meaning when my thoughts are less dominated by dominant modes of critical analysis), I ask myself how it could happen that a new nation was invented to hold complete dominion in a land where verifiable nations already existed? How is it that the spiritual practices, ethical beliefs, systems of government, gender roles, and ecology of the original peoples of this land (as well as the peoples themselves) were not elemental to the construction of this invented nation? (The so-called Iroquois influence in the writing of the constitution seems thoroughly remote in its implementation.) These are purposely naive questions because the answers are equally simple. Such co-existence requires a humility of spirit and a sense of communal responsibility with other living beings which totally counters what we've come to understand as the American Work Ethic.

M-A O-R: Did you see cooperation between legal and illegal immigrants in *Watsonville*?

CM: Obviously. Chicanos are often the children of "illegal" immigrants. In *Watsonville* both Juan and Sonora represent that cooperation. My character Chente, I believe, is more the exception than the rule. The actual movement in support of immigrants' rights in the United States (documented and not) is a coalition movement of citizens, documented workers and the undocumented.



VG Interview: Cherrie Moraga

M-A O-R: After having read *Waiting in the Wings* I feel that, in some ways, *The Hungry Woman* is a very autobiographical play.

CM: It is not really so. I started “Medea” long before I ever had a son.

M-A O-R: Is this play your dark vision of the future?

CM: No. It’s rather a critique and a warning in an extended metaphor. I believe in the Chicano Nation (the right and longing for “place”) and also fundamentally believe that what continues to weaken and sicken us as a “pueblo” is homophobia and an entrenched misogyny. This is not to say I feel these oppressive behaviors are more prevalent among Chicanos than other groups, only that Chicanos are those who I care to cure.

M-A O-R: How has your experience of motherhood affected your vision of the future? After all these years of being a mother, is your view any different from the one you had at the moment you were writing the play or *Waiting in the Wings*?

CM: I feel all the more strongly about ourselves (as Chicanos/as) trying to raise our children with a knowledge of their indigenous history (their rightful place in these Americas). I feel all the more committed to memory and using memory as a place to build a future. I am ever-humbled by how difficult it is to teach one’s son (as a Chicana feminist) to love and respect himself and, at the same time, to love and respect women in a racist/sexist dominant culture. This has nothing to do with political correctness. This is basic to our survival as a people.

M-A O-R: Why did you choose to describe the U.S. and the Américas as a “balkanized” world in *The Hungry Woman*? Do you think that the concept of ethnicity in the U.S. may be any near the fragmented and exclusionist idea of ethnicity that you describe in the play? I’m asking this because there are those who think we are witnessing the fragmentation of American identity in distinct, intolerant ethnic ghettos.

CM: I can’t answer all that, but. . . the truth is I was excited by the possibility that if a nation-state that seemed so monolithic as the USSR could fall apart, that maybe the USA could too. That we could build communities based on shared cultural values, blood ties, spiritual beliefs, common histories.



VG Interview: Cherrie Moraga

CM (continued): I understand all the negative and dangerous implications of ethnic separatism and discuss this in my essay “Queer Aztlán,” but the idea of a land of ours gave me hope, ironically. I share Medea’s longing for a land that was once hers.

M-A O-R: The play emphasizes the strong sense of alienation and displacement of the main character? Is this why you chose the tragedy as a dramatic form?

CM: To quote myself in another play-in-progress: I chose tragedy, “because it teaches deeper and harder than happy.”

M-A O-R: One of the characteristics of social epic theatre is, according to Bertolt Brecht, that it should have a chorus. Why was it so important for you that *The Hungry Woman* had a chorus and that this chorus was the Cihuatateo, the Aztec women who had died in childbirth?

CM: Oh, I liked the idea. When I saw those stoned icons (at el museo de antropología in D.F.) lined up like that, looking like true warrior women (there were four of them), I knew they were my chorus. I appreciated the idea that mothering and losing our babies was a warrior’s act. (The Aztecs had some things right). Also, the play is in conversation with the Greek (thus, the chorus), as well as the Aztec as well as the Mexican Llorona mythology.

From “The Insatiable Woman”:

Ironically, the story of “La Llorona,” the Mexican Weeping Woman, was never told to me by my mother or any member of my family; and yet, has had a more profound impact upon my writer’s psyche than any story she recounted. The traditional Mexican version of La Llorona tells the tale of a woman who is sexually betrayed by her man, and, in what was either a fit of jealous rage or pure retaliation, she kills their children by drowning them in a river. Upon her death, she is unable to enter heaven because of her crime. Instead, she is destined to spend all of eternity searching for her dead children. Her lament, “Mis Hijos!” becomes the blood-chilling cry heard along irrigation ditches and country creeks, warning children that any misbehavior, straying too far from camp, for example, might lead to abduction by this female phantom. (...)

But as the daughter of a thoroughly Mexican mother, I did know about women being punished for the rest of their lives for some sin that happened somewhere in our collective history. “Eres mujer.” “That’s all we need to know. That’s the crime we feminists are still solving. I echo here Helena María Viramontes’ story, “Growing,” where she writes of a father reprimanding his daughter.



VG Interview: Cherrie Moraga

When I first learned the Mexican story of La Llorona, I immediately recognized that the weeping woman, that aberration, that criminal against nature, was a sister. Maybe by being a lesbian, my identification was more easily won, fully knowing my crime was tantamount to hers. Any way you slice it, we were both a far and mournful cry from obedient daughters. But I am convinced that La Llorona is every Mexican woman's story, regardless of sexuality. She is sister to us all. (...)

The official version was a lie. I knew that from the same bone that first held the memory of the cuento. Who would kill their kid over some man dumping them? It wasn't a strong enough reason. And yet everyone from Anaya to Euripides was telling us so. Well, if traición was the reason, could infanticide then be retaliation against misogyny, an act of vengeance not against one man, but man in general for a betrayal much graver than sexual infidelity: the enslavement and deformation of our sex?

A partera friend posed another possibility to me. As a woman who had worked as a nurse-mid-wife for many years among mechicanas, she was intimately connected with the full range of maternal instincts (both sanctioned and taboo). "Infanticide is not a homicide," she told me, "but a suicide. A mother never completely separates from her child. She always remains a part of her children." But what is it then we are killing off in ourselves and why?

The answer to these questions resides, of course, in allowing La Llorona to speak for herself, to say something other than "mis hijos" for all eternity. When this dawned on me, so did the beginnings of a play I began four years ago and still has me working and wondering. I called it a "Mexican Medea" in reference to both the Greek Euripides drama and the Llorona story. As Euripides' Medea turned to the Greek gods as judge and consul, I turned to the pre-Columbian Aztec deities. In my research, I discovered another story, the Aztec creation myth of "the Hungry Woman." And this story became pivotal for me, an aperture in my search to unlock la fuerza de La Llorona in our mechicana lives.

In the place where the spirits live, there was once a woman who cried constantly for food. She had mouths in her wrists, mouths in her elbows, and mouths in her ankles and knees. . . Then to comfort the poor woman [the spirits] flew down and began to make grass and flowers out of her skin. From her hair they made forests, from her eyes, pools and springs, from her shoulders, mountains, and from her nose, valleys. At last she will be satisfied, they thought. But just as before, her mouths were everywhere, biting and moaning. . . opening and snapping shut, but they [were] never filled. Sometimes at night, when the wind blows, you can hear her crying for food.



VG Interview: Cherrie Moraga

Who else other than La Llorona could this be? It is always la Llorona's cries we mistake for the wind, but she's not crying for her children. She's crying for food, sustenance. Tiene hambre la mujer. And at last, upon encountering this myth—this pre-capitalist, pre-colonial, pre-catholic mito—my jornada began to make sense. This is the original Llorona y tiene mucha hambre. I realized that she has been the subject of my work all along, from my earliest writings, my earliest feminism. She is the story that has never been told truly, the story of that hungry Mexican woman who is called puta, bruja, jota, loca because she refuses to forget that her half-life is not a natural-born fact.

M-A O-R: I know that these women were thought to have supernatural powers in Aztec society. Is this your tribute to women's strength as mothers? Does it reflect in any way any of your own fears?

CM: No, they don't scare me. I am inspired by them. As I am by Coatlicue.

M-A O-R: The goddess Coatlicue is another mythological presence in your play. Why did you chose this goddess? Has Gloria Anzaldúa's description of the "Coatlicue state" in *Borderlands/ La Frontera* influenced you at all?

CM: No, Anzaldúa's description did not influence me at all, although probably Gloria was the first to tell me of Coatlicue. I learned a great deal from Guadalupe García, with whom I worked on a performance piece she conceived called "Coatlicue's Call." I talk about this in "Insatiable Woman." I discuss my fascination with Coatlicue simply based on the fact that she is the goddess with the power to create AND take away life. The latter aspect of our powers as females has been repressed in our cultural memory. I resurrect that memory of Coatlicue (via Medea).

From "The Insatiable Woman":

I am looking for the insatiable woman. I am reminded of Mexican artist, Guadalupe García's, cry in her performance piece, "Coatlicue's Call." "She laments, "I am looking for a woman called Guadalupe. " Maybe we're all looking for the same lady. When La Llorona kills her children, she is killing a Mexican male-defined motherhood that robs us of our womanhood. I first discussed this desire to kill patriarchal motherhood in relation to another Mexican myth, the "Birth of Huitzilopochtli. " The Mexica myth recounts the story of Coyolxauhqui, the Aztec moon goddess who attempts to kill her mother, Coatlicue, when she learns of her aging mother's pregnancy. Through the murder she hopes to halt the birth of the War God, Huitzilopochtli, which will also mean the birth of slavery, human sacrifice, and imperialism (in short, patriarchy). She fails in her attempt and instead is murdered and dismembered by her brother Huitzilopochtli and banished into the darkness to become the moon.



VG Interview: Cherrie Moraga

This ancient myth reminds Mexican women that, culturally-speaking, there is no mother-woman to assume who is defined by us. We have never had the power to do the defining. We wander not in search of our dead children, but our lost selves, our lost sexuality, our lost spirituality, our lost sabiduría. No wonder La Llorona is so irrefutably punished, destined to walk the earth en busca de sus niños. To find and manifest our true selves (that “woman before the fall,” I wrote elsewhere) what might we have to change in the world as we know it? “Mis Hijos” she cries; but, I hear her saying something else. “Mis hijas perdidas.” And I answer: “Te busco a tí también, madre/ hermana/ hija.” I am looking for the hungry woman.

“La Llorona,” “the Hungry Woman,” “the Dismemberment of Coyolxauhqui” -- these are the stories that have shaped us. We, Chicanas, remember them in spite of ourselves, and our families’ and society’s efforts to have us forget. We remember these stories where mothers worked in factories, not fields and children played in city plunges, not country creeks. The body remembers.

M-A O-R: In *The Hungry Woman*, Luna is depicted as the object of both Medea and Chacmool’s desire, a “feminine” innocence that Chacmool risks losing and that Medea has already lost. She is a warrior woman. I know this might not be all you want to say, for indeed Medea is also very aware of her female body and sexuality and refuses to be trapped in femme-butche categories that may reproduce male-female gender relations and stereotypes about lesbians.

CM: I don’t think femme-butche categories necessarily reproduce male-female gender relations and stereotypes about lesbians. I’m not sure Medea really thinks this either, but she does get angry at Luna when she perceives her as trying to act like a man and then resents Luna when she does not assume the power of a man. In other words, she is confused and a realistic, frightened character, afraid of losing her son and her land forever.

M-A O-R: But Medea transgresses sex and gender categories. . .

CM: Yes, but no more so than Luna.



VG Interview: Cherrie Moraga

M-A O-R: Why is it that Medea is a “dying breed of female”? Is it because she is neither a conventional “Mexicana or Chicana” “woman” nor a conventional “lesbian”?

CM: Oh, but she is conventional in some ways, one who only knows how to be the “beloved.” But there’s no place for that now. Her beauty won’t win her land back. She will have to do violence. She senses it is coming, although I don’t think she can name it yet, but betrayal (and possibly death) lurks in the future. This position harkens back to Coatlicue. She will assume her (ancient) power to destroy.

M-A O-R: I’m curious about the ritual scene of Medea giving birth to Luna with the help of the Cihuatateo. Is this in any way related to her desire for a “new woman”, or perhaps the desire for a daughter?

CM: Probably both. “I wanted a female to love,” she says, i.e. a daughter, a woman-lover, a female self. Later on, she says “is that how I died giving birth to myself?” Luna is born dead (a miscarriage), the relationship is over.

M-A O-R: In essays such as “Queer Aztlán” and “Art in América con acento” you talk about the connection between social struggle and historical, cultural memory. Can you elaborate on that?

CM: See “Sour Grapes”

From “Sour Grapes:”

Land has memory. And the original peoples of that land (and those who daily live its lessons) are the memory-carriers. The failure to remember, failure to respect and defend the memory carriers, destroys cultures, ecological environments, destroys lives. The United States’ record of genocide against the original peoples of this land and the ecological devastation it has wreaked upon it are testimony to this fact. Today, our memory carriers, often removed from their place of origin, are more and more difficult to encounter. If we are fortunate, we may find elders in our own families who still carry stories with them. But the memory carriers are also our youth, if they can find form in which to express it. And this is where art comes in; for it is through art that cultural memory is transmitted. Our storytellers are the memory carriers. Whether immigrant or native-born, our artists are the chief purveyors of memory. . .and as a consequence, vision. I do not want indigenous Vietnamese, Palestinians, Sephardic Jews, Gitanos, the Quiche Maya to forget their cultures when they take residence on this land.



VG Interview: Cherrie Moraga

And with even greater passion I do not want their artists to forget their lands. Recently, I saw on public t.v. a re-run of an interview with Toni Morrison, which had taken place a number of years ago, upon the publication of her book, Beloved. As always, Morrison's eloquence awed me. But what most astounded me were her words: "What is really infinite is the past." And I thought of how un-American that way of thinking is, for this "nation" was built upon the belief that one could and should forget the past and invent a future. By contrast, she spoke of the future as something finite; and indeed it is, from an artist's perspective. Because history in all its limitlessness determines the future. And unraveling history, the multitude of versions of the story, the story from multifarious perspectives, this is limitless. And how great is our task to remember if we are people of color artists, if we are artists without a written history, if we are artists exiled from our ancestral lands. Because our version of the story has never been told. Still.

Finding the path to memory is my task as an artist. Writing for the "Ancestors" as playwright August Wilson has said. That's my job. To remember ancestral messages, to counter the U.S. culture of forgetfulness. Sometimes memory is no more than a very faint scent. You sniff it, take a step, stop and sniff again, and gradually make your way along a path to a people. You are blind and hand-and-tongue-tied. You just keep sniffing toward the warmth of the light on your face, the scent of heat on the stone-packed dirt beneath your feet, the cooling of a summer central valley evening drawing a sudden chill to your skin. You go backwards in time. You write. You're right. Even if you never read it in a book, saw it on stage or at the movies, you're on the right road.

M-A O-R: How do you see yourself in relation to U.S. culture and to Mexican culture?

CM: See "Sour Grapes:"

From "Sour Grapes:"

I am a half-breed Chicana. The difference between my gringo immigrant side and my native Mexican is that when gringos came to the United States, they were supposed to forget their origins. My white daddy isn't quite sure what he is. Orphan son of a British Canadian, he thinks. His mother . . . French, yes French for sure, cuz there was some French grandmother somewhere, but Missouri is where they all end up. She meeting my grandfather whom I only met once . . . they say . . . I was too young to remember . . . my Dad's history too vague to remember because they came to this country to forget.



VG Interview: Cherrie Moraga

Mexicans, however, don't forget. Anything. We remember our land daily in the same smells, same seasons, same skies, same sierras, same street signs . . . San Francisco . . . Alameda . . . El Presidio . . . the Spanish sounds slip and slide away. It is a colonial language, but of an Indian people. And the measure of our "Americanism" (in U.S. terms), the testimony to our acculturation to U.S. culture, is our eventual forgetting. But I remember . . . one smog-laden sticky-thighed childhood afternoon, sitting inside the cool stone walls of the Old San Gabriel Mission, our parish church. The nun tells us, "There are dead Indians buried down there, too." She said this "too" like an after-thought, after roll-calling the rolling r's of each of the Spanish friars' names carved into the man-sized floor plaque filling the center aisle floor. "Down there," she said. Down there under my white Oxford mission schoolgirl soles, shuffling against the creaking wooden pews and a buried history. I am neither Spanish friar nor mission Indian, but it's Indian history I'm diggin' up, diggin' for, thirty-five years later. Or maybe I'm just hunting for some woman somewhere some breed some mixed-blood mixed-up mess of a woman-loving-woman like me.

I am once twice three times removed. But I know. . . I ain't all-immigrant.

To me, one of the greatest and most bitter ironies is that the Mexican immigrant (and by extension the salvadoreña, gualtemalteca, Nicaraguans) reminds us, U.S. Latinos, that we are not really immigrants at all. What most Latino immigrants share is poverty and what most poor people share in the racist nation-states of Latin America is their Indianism. They may be calling themselves by their nation-state name -- "Mexican," "Guatemalan," "Nicaraguan". . . , but their blood is speaking Indigenous American. And the shape of the head, the nose, the cheekbones, the shade of skin is talking back.